

Untouchable



My name is Hires. I am fifteen years old and live in the village of Paliyad in western India. People say I am an "untouchable," a dirty, "polluted" person. Yet I do not have a choice of what I am. My parents are untouchables, as my grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers and cousins. People here are born into their roles. Though untouchability was outlawed in India in 1950, it still exists in small, remote villages. I want to tell you about the caste system and how it affects people like me.

Since ancient times when Aryans ruled, people in Indian society have been ranked in castes. At the heart of the ancient culture was the idea that the conquerors were superior to their subjects. After the lighter-skinned Aryans took over India, they looked down on the darker skinned native people. However skin color was only one factor in this social system. People were divided into five main castes, or jati. Over a long time the system became more and more complicated with thousands of different divisions within each jati and very complex rules for each. To make it easier to understand, I will just explain the five main castes.

As established, the Brahmans, or priests, were the highest castes. Below them, the Kshatriya were the warriors and rulers of the time. In the third caste were the vaishyas, the merchants, traders, and skilled workers, including farmers. The servants and laborers were called sudra; these were the dark-skinned native people and had very few rights in society. Finally, even below the lowest caste, untouchables like me were slaves, prisoners of war, criminals, and other outcasts of Indian society. Today castes remain but are different and mostly not as strict.

Still, the life of an untouchable is terrible. Since the caste system began, we have never been treated as humans. And we do the jobs no one else will: everything from cleaning streets and sewers to handling dead bodies. Even today in my village, we are treated like beasts. At the tea stalls we have to drink from

separate cups from everyone else. Ours are chipped and dirty. When we finish, we clean our own cups, while everyone else just hands them back to the vendor. Other people will not even eat food that has been touched by us.

We have to walk as far as 20 minutes away to get our water and carry it back to our homes because we are not allowed to use the village taps. We are not allowed inside the temples, and in school untouchable children have to sit just outside the classroom door and listen. This is why most untouchables cannot read or write. I am lucky to be smart so I can, but I was still sad that I could not play soccer with the other children in school. Untouchables were not allowed to touch the ball, so my friends and I played games with stones.

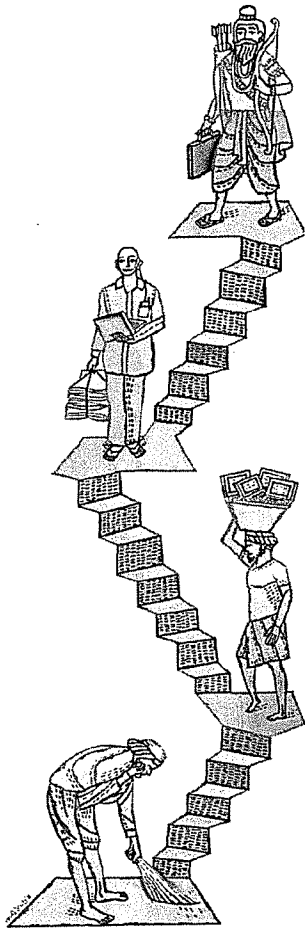
As I have said, the constitution written in 1950 made untouchability illegal. Still there are local codes in my village and others that keep us in our low place. Where I live, whenever untouchables are nearing others, it is required that we must tap sticks together. It is so they will know we are coming and can avoid us. I have heard that in some villages, untouchables must stay at least 65 feet away from Brahmans or be arrested!

Even here we are afraid of police and other authorities. If an untouchable accuses someone of another caste of a crime, it is unlikely that the police will even record it. But violence against us is common, yet rarely reported. I'm sure you understand why.

You may ask, though, since there are still many untouchables, why we would accept this treatment. I suppose part of the reason is that we are taught that each jati has its own dharma, our duties to fulfill. Were it not for us, the jobs we do for society would not be done. They are bad jobs, but needed. Just as the vaishyas are needed to run businesses, we must pick up trash. Our caste determines our lives: where we live, who we marry, our work, friends, and even whom we can eat a meal with! Therefore I suppose it could greatly upset society if all of the labels and requirements were removed. And of course, we believe our actions on earth in this life determine the quality of our next life. This means that if our belief is true, we must for some reason deserve the misery in our lives right now.



Considering Castes



What are five things you learned about the caste system from Hiresh's story?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

What points does Hiresh make that support the existence of the caste system? Do you agree or disagree, and why? _____

Do you think the caste system can ever be truly abolished? If so, how? If not, why not? _____

